



REGIONAL DIPLOMACY AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION: EXAMINING UZBEKISTAN-TALIBAN RELATIONS IN THE POST-2021 AFGHAN GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT. *Uzbekistan's diplomatic and economic engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan in the post-2021 geopolitical landscape highlights a strategic recalibration in Central Asia's regional approach. This study examines the evolution of Uzbekistan-Taliban relations, focusing on economic cooperation, security concerns, and diplomatic engagement while contextualizing the broader regional implications. Uzbekistan has pursued a pragmatic policy of economic interdependence through trade agreements, infrastructure projects such as the Trans-Afghan Railway, and energy cooperation, to ensure stability and prevent spillover threats. This paper explores how Uzbekistan's approach aligns with regional security concerns and the varied responses of Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—toward the Taliban regime. The study analyzes Uzbekistan's geopolitical and economic foundations by employing Realism, Pragmatism in International Relations, Regional Security Complex Theory, and Economic Interdependence Theory. Methodologically, the research relies on qualitative analysis, incorporating official statements, economic data, policy reports, and expert assessments. The findings indicate that while economic cooperation may serve as a stabilizing factor, security risks, ideological divergences, and geopolitical uncertainties continue to shape regional dynamics. The study concludes with policy recommendations for fostering a balanced, pragmatic, and secure regional approach to Afghanistan.*

KEYWORDS: *Uzbekistan-Taliban relations, Central Asian geopolitics, economic cooperation, regional security, Afghanistan, diplomatic engagement.*

INTRODUCTION

Uzbekistan's engagement with the Taliban following the latter's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 represents a pragmatic approach aimed at ensuring regional stability, enhancing economic cooperation, and preventing security spillover. Given Afghanistan's strategic location as a gateway between Central and South Asia, Uzbekistan's foreign policy has prioritized maintaining diplomatic channels with the Taliban to mitigate extremist threats and foster economic connectivity (Khalid, 2023a). Unlike other regional actors adopting a more cautious stance, Tashkent has focused on counterterrorism cooperation, urging the Taliban to prevent militant groups such as the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the remnants of

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the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) from using Afghan territory for cross-border operations (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2023). This engagement reflects Uzbekistan's broader geopolitical strategy of ensuring its southern border's security while positioning itself as a key mediator in regional diplomacy.

Economically, Uzbekistan's approach is driven by the potential benefits of trade expansion and connectivity projects. Bilateral trade between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan reached \$1.2 billion in 2022, demonstrating the growing economic interdependence between the two countries (World Bank, 2023). One of the most ambitious projects is the Trans-Afghan Railway, which aims to connect Uzbekistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan, potentially increasing regional trade by \$5 billion annually upon completion (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2023). Uzbekistan has also invested in Afghanistan's energy and infrastructure sectors, including power transmission lines and road networks, as part of its broader objective of enhancing regional economic integration (Eurasianet, 2023c). These initiatives align with Tashkent's efforts to reduce reliance on external factors such as Russia and China while fostering deeper economic linkages within Central Asia (Khalid, 2023d).

Diplomatically, Uzbekistan has actively positioned itself as a regional mediator by hosting forums such as the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan in 2023, which emphasized regional cooperation and Afghanistan's integration into the broader international system (United Nations [UN], 2023). This diplomatic engagement extends to multilateral platforms such as the C5+1 Dialogue, where Uzbekistan has sought to build consensus on Afghanistan-related security and economic issues while maintaining balanced relations with global powers, including the United States and China (U.S. State Department, 2023). Despite these efforts, Uzbekistan's approach has faced criticism, particularly regarding concerns that engaging with the Taliban risks legitimizing an unrecognized regime that has been widely condemned for human rights violations, particularly against women and minority groups (Human Rights Watch, 2023). However, Uzbek officials have maintained that engagement does not equate to formal recognition but reflects a pragmatic necessity to address security concerns and economic realities (Abdullaev, 2022).

Another challenge Uzbekistan faces is the potential risk of economic overdependence on Afghanistan, given the Taliban's governance challenges and Afghanistan's fragile economic structure (Rashid, 2023a). Critics argue that instability in Afghanistan could undermine long-term investments and regional projects. However, Uzbekistan has mitigated these risks by diversifying its economic partnerships and securing international financial support for its infrastructure initiatives, such as the Trans-Afghan Railway, which is backed by multilateral institutions (ADB, 2023). Ultimately, Uzbekistan's engagement with the Taliban reflects a strategic balance between security imperatives, economic ambitions, and regional leadership aspirations. Uzbekistan has reinforced its diplomatic influence in Central Asia while advancing long-term connectivity and trade goals by positioning itself as a key stakeholder in Afghanistan's future. As the geopolitical landscape evolves, Uzbekistan's pragmatic approach will be crucial in shaping Afghanistan's regional integration and fostering broader economic and security cooperation in Central Asia.

METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative research design with a multi-method approach, incorporating content analysis, case study methodology, and comparative analysis to examine Uzbekistan-Taliban relations in the post-2021 geopolitical landscape. A qualitative approach is best suited for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of Uzbekistan's diplomatic, economic, and security engagements with the Taliban-led Afghanistan. Content analysis is employed to systematically examine policy documents, government statements, official reports, academic literature, and media sources, including those from the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNODC, World Bank, Crisis Group, and Human Rights Watch. This method enables the identification of key themes and patterns in Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan, such as trade, security cooperation, and regional integration. Additionally, a case study methodology is utilized to analyze specific initiatives, including the Trans-Afghan Railway, the Termez Border Trade Zone, and Uzbekistan's counterterrorism coordination with the Taliban. These case studies provide a focused examination of Uzbekistan's strategic policies and their practical implications. Furthermore, a comparative analysis is conducted to evaluate Uzbekistan's policy approach in contrast with those of Pakistan, Iran, and other Central Asian states, offering a broader geopolitical perspective on regional diplomacy. This methodological framework ensures reliability and validity by cross-verifying data from multiple sources, thus minimizing bias and enhancing objectivity. However, certain limitations exist, such as restricted access to primary Taliban sources, necessitating reliance on secondary data, and the evolving nature of Afghanistan's political landscape, which may impact the long-term applicability of findings. Despite these challenges, this methodology provides a systematic, evidence-based, and academically rigorous analysis of Uzbekistan-Taliban relations, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of regional diplomacy and economic cooperation in post-2021 Afghanistan.

UZBEKISTAN'S DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT WITH THE TALIBAN

Foreign Policy Shifts Since the Taliban's Return

The return of the Taliban to power in August 2021 marked a significant shift in Afghanistan's geopolitical landscape, prompting regional actors to reassess their diplomatic strategies. Among these states, Uzbekistan has demonstrated a pragmatic approach, balancing security concerns with economic opportunities while maintaining regional stability. Initially, Uzbekistan adopted a cautious stance, focusing on border security and avoiding premature recognition of the Taliban regime. However, as the political reality in Afghanistan became entrenched, Uzbekistan transitioned to active diplomatic engagement, fostering dialogue on trade, infrastructure development, and counterterrorism. This shift underscores Uzbekistan's broader foreign policy strategy, which prioritizes regional cooperation, economic integration, and strategic autonomy amidst the competing interests of global powers (Abdullaev, 2022; Khalid, 2023d; ICG, 2023).

Concerns over security, extremism, and border stability shaped Uzbekistan's initial response to the Taliban's return. Given Afghanistan's history as a sanctuary for militant groups, Uzbekistan feared the resurgence of transnational terrorism, including

threats from the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and other extremist factions. The government immediately fortified its 144-kilometer border with Afghanistan by deploying additional security forces and enhancing surveillance infrastructure (Eurasianet, 2023f). At the diplomatic level, Uzbekistan refrained from recognizing the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government, aligning itself with the broader international community's cautious stance. Nevertheless, it avoided confrontation with the new regime, maintaining communication channels to ensure stability along the shared border. Additionally, Tashkent provided humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, delivering over 2,000 tons of essential supplies, including food, medicine, and construction materials, signaling a humanitarian rather than a political engagement with the Taliban (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

By early 2022, Uzbekistan recalibrated its policy, shifting from a guarded approach to active diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. This transition was influenced by multiple factors, including the recognition that Afghanistan's economic collapse could destabilize the region and exacerbate security threats. Economic imperatives also played a role, as Uzbekistan sought to preserve and expand trade ties with Afghanistan, which had grown significantly in recent years. In 2022, bilateral trade reached \$1.2 billion, up from \$800 million in 2021, highlighting Afghanistan's importance as an economic partner (World Bank, 2023). One of the most notable diplomatic initiatives was Uzbekistan's hosting of the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan in July 2023. The conference brought together regional and international stakeholders to discuss Afghanistan's economic reconstruction, counterterrorism efforts, and humanitarian needs. Uzbekistan positioned itself as a key mediator, advocating for pragmatic engagement with the Taliban while urging the regime to adopt more inclusive governance policies and respect international obligations (UN News, 2023).

Additionally, Uzbekistan has been a driving force behind the Trans-Afghan Railway Project, a strategic infrastructure initiative to connect Central Asia with South Asia via Afghanistan. This project, supported by international financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), is expected to enhance regional trade and economic connectivity, providing Afghanistan with a crucial link to global markets (ADB, 2023). By spearheading such initiatives, Uzbekistan has demonstrated its commitment to fostering economic stability in Afghanistan to promote broader regional security.

Uzbekistan's diplomatic transition from caution to proactive engagement reflects a pragmatic assessment of regional dynamics. While security concerns remain paramount, Uzbekistan has recognized that isolating Afghanistan under Taliban rule could have adverse consequences, including economic instability, refugee crises, and the expansion of extremist networks. Instead, its approach aligns with broader Central Asian efforts to stabilize Afghanistan through economic integration rather than political confrontation (Khalid, 2023d). This strategy also highlights Uzbekistan's increasing diplomatic autonomy. Unlike in previous decades, when Tashkent largely followed Moscow's lead in regional affairs, it has now adopted a more independent foreign policy, balancing relations with major global powers while prioritizing regional security and economic cooperation. Uzbekistan's position has also gained tacit support from neighboring Central Asian states, which share similar concerns regarding Afghanistan's stability and its implications for the broader region (ICG, 2023).

Despite its strategic logic, Uzbekistan's engagement with the Taliban is not without controversy. Critics argue that by engaging with the Taliban, Uzbekistan risks legitimizing an unrecognized regime that has been widely condemned for its human rights violations, particularly regarding women's rights and political repression (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This concern is amplified by the fact that the Taliban has not demonstrated significant progress in addressing international demands for political inclusivity and human rights protections. Moreover, some analysts warn that closer ties with the Taliban could embolden extremist groups in the region. While Uzbekistan has strengthened its border security, the long-term risks associated with a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan remain uncertain, particularly regarding the potential resurgence of extremist networks that could destabilize Central Asia (Rashid, 2023a). Another challenge is economic dependence. By investing heavily in trade and infrastructure projects with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan may expose itself to economic vulnerabilities if the Taliban government fails to ensure long-term stability. The Trans-Afghan Railway, for example, relies on the assumption that Afghanistan will remain a viable transit corridor. However, continued internal instability or shifts in Taliban policy could threaten the project's success (ADB, 2023). In response to these concerns, Uzbek policymakers emphasize that engagement with the Taliban is not an endorsement of their governance model but a pragmatic necessity. The alternative—complete diplomatic isolation—would likely exacerbate Afghanistan's instability and increase regional security risks. By maintaining dialogue and economic cooperation, Uzbekistan seeks to influence the Taliban's policies while safeguarding its own national interests (Abdullaev, 2022).

Additionally, Uzbekistan's engagement strategy is not unilateral but coordinated with other regional and international actors. By working closely with China, Russia, the European Union, and multilateral organizations, Uzbekistan ensures its initiatives align with broader efforts to promote Afghan stability (Khalid, 2023d). This multilateral approach mitigates the risks of over-dependence and enhances the sustainability of economic and security-related cooperation. Therefore, Uzbekistan's diplomatic approach to the Taliban has evolved significantly since 2021, transitioning from initial caution to active engagement. This shift reflects a strategic calculation aimed at promoting regional stability through economic cooperation and pragmatic diplomacy. While concerns remain regarding the Taliban's governance, security threats, and financial uncertainties, Uzbekistan's engagement is framed as a necessary response to the geopolitical realities of post-2021 Afghanistan. By balancing security measures with economic initiatives, Uzbekistan has positioned itself as a key regional actor, shaping Afghanistan's integration into Central Asia while safeguarding its national interests.

Bilateral Meetings and Diplomatic Dialogues

Uzbekistan's diplomatic engagement with the Taliban has evolved significantly since the group's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. Initially, Uzbekistan took a cautious approach, prioritizing the security of its 144-kilometer border to prevent potential instability, terrorism, and drug trafficking from spilling over. This strategy stemmed from concerns about regional security and a desire to maintain internal stability (Abdullaev, 2022). As the situation in Afghanistan stabilized, Uzbekistan

transitioned to a more proactive diplomatic stance. Recognizing the Taliban as the de facto authority, Uzbek officials participated in high-level meetings to discuss mutual interests such as trade, transit, and border security. This pragmatic approach sought to promote regional stability and economic integration, aligning with Uzbekistan's wider foreign policy objectives (Khalid, 2023d). A notable example of this engagement occurred with the visit of Uzbek Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov to Kabul in August 2024. This visit represented the highest-level meeting between an Afghan leader and a foreign official since the Taliban's return to power. During this meeting, both nations signed 35 memorandums of understanding, valued at \$2.5 billion, covering trade and investment deals. These agreements encompassed various sectors, including infrastructure development, energy projects, and agricultural cooperation, highlighting a shared commitment to economic collaboration (VOA News, 2024).

In addition to economic agreements, Uzbekistan has played a pivotal role in facilitating regional dialogues. For instance, Tashkent hosted an international conference on Afghanistan in July 2022, bringing together representatives from nearly 30 countries, including the United States and the European Union. This platform allowed the international community to engage directly with the Taliban, discussing avenues for peace and regional cooperation (SIPRI, 2022). Despite these positive developments, challenges persist. One significant concern is the construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal by the Taliban, which aims to divert water from the Amu Darya River. Uzbekistan has expressed apprehension regarding the potential impact of this project on its water security and agricultural productivity. In response, both nations have engaged in diplomatic discussions to address these concerns, emphasizing the importance of collaborative water resource management (Eurasianet, 2023b).

Critics argue that Uzbekistan's engagement with the Taliban may inadvertently legitimize a regime with a contentious human rights record, potentially undermining international efforts to promote human rights and democratic governance in Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2023). However, proponents contend that isolating the Taliban could exacerbate regional instability. Engaging with Afghanistan's current leadership is viewed as a pragmatic approach to ensure security, foster economic development, and address shared challenges (ICG, 2023). Consequently, Uzbekistan's diplomatic engagement with the Taliban reflects a strategic balance between safeguarding national interests and promoting regional stability. Through high-level meetings and bilateral agreements, Uzbekistan aims to enhance economic cooperation and address security concerns. While challenges remain, this approach underscores Uzbekistan's commitment to constructive dialogue and regional integration.

Uzbekistan's Balancing Act in International Diplomacy

Uzbekistan has strategically positioned itself as a key regional player by balancing its diplomatic relations with major global powers – Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union—while simultaneously engaging with the Taliban government in Afghanistan without granting formal recognition (Abdullaev, 2022). This pragmatic approach allows Uzbekistan to safeguard its economic and security interests while aligning with international diplomatic norms. Trade between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan reached \$1.2 billion in 2022, highlighting economic interdependence

despite political uncertainties (World Bank, 2023). Additionally, Uzbekistan has provided Afghanistan with over 2,000 tons of humanitarian aid since the Taliban's takeover, reinforcing its commitment to regional stability (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Infrastructure projects such as the Trans-Afghan Railway, backed by \$500 million in international funding from entities like the Asian Development Bank (ADB), underscore Uzbekistan's efforts to integrate Afghanistan into broader regional trade networks (ADB, 2023). The Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan, held in July 2023, demonstrated Uzbekistan's diplomatic leadership by convening representatives from Russia, China, the U.S., the EU, and the Taliban to discuss economic and security cooperation (United Nations News, 2023).

While some analysts argue that engagement with the Taliban could strain Uzbekistan's relations with the West, mainly due to concerns over human rights violations in Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2023), others contend that Uzbekistan's participation in multilateral platforms such as the C5+1 dialogue with the U.S. helps mitigate these risks by ensuring diplomatic diversification (U.S. State Department, 2023). President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has emphasized that Uzbekistan's policy toward Afghanistan is guided by pragmatism, economic cooperation, and regional security (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). However, the unpredictability of the Taliban's governance poses a challenge to long-term stability, raising questions about the sustainability of Uzbekistan's investments and diplomatic engagement (ICG, 2023). Nevertheless, Uzbekistan's balancing act—engaging major powers while maintaining constructive yet cautious ties with the Taliban—demonstrates its evolving role as a regional stabilizer in Central Asia (Eurasianet, 2023c). This diplomatic strategy enhances Uzbekistan's geopolitical standing, but it requires continuous recalibration to adapt to shifting regional and global dynamics (Khalid, 2023d).

ECONOMIC COOPERATION BETWEEN UZBEKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN:

Key Trade and Infrastructure Projects

Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, Uzbekistan has adopted a pragmatic approach to economic engagement, resulting in significant growth in bilateral trade. Trade volume between the two countries increased from \$800 million in 2021 to \$1.2 billion in 2022, highlighting the success of economic agreements and Uzbekistan's commitment to regional trade expansion (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Uzbekistan's primary exports to Afghanistan include electricity, construction materials, and agricultural products, which are essential for Afghanistan's reconstruction and economic stability. On the other hand, Uzbekistan imports textiles and minerals from Afghanistan, reinforcing mutual economic interdependence (Eurasianet, 2023a). Infrastructure development, particularly in trade and transit, plays a critical role in ensuring the efficiency of these economic exchanges. Uzbekistan has allocated \$500 million to key projects such as the Trans-Afghan Railway and the modernization of the Termez border crossing, aiming to enhance connectivity and trade efficiency (ADB, 2023).

Afghanistan holds strategic importance in Uzbekistan's regional trade policy, serving as a transit hub for trade with South Asia, particularly with Pakistan and India. By improving infrastructure and economic ties with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan aims to gain

access to South Asian markets, diversifying its trade routes beyond Central Asia (World Bank, 2023). The development of the Trans-Afghan Railway, a \$5 billion initiative, is a cornerstone of this strategy. Once completed, the railway is expected to increase regional trade by \$5 billion annually, transforming Uzbekistan into a key player in Eurasian connectivity (ADB, 2023). The Termez border crossing, another significant project, has been expanded into a central logistics hub. This border facility facilitates commercial trade and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, reflecting Uzbekistan's balanced approach to economic cooperation and regional stability (Eurasianet, 2023c). Furthermore, Uzbekistan remains a key electricity supplier to Afghanistan, exporting 1.5 billion kWh in 2022, which has been crucial in addressing Afghanistan's energy shortages and sustaining essential services (World Bank, 2023).

Experts and policymakers highlight the potential benefits of Uzbekistan's economic initiatives. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has described the Trans-Afghan Railway as transformative, emphasizing its role in making Central Asia a hub for international trade (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Similarly, the Asian Development Bank has underscored the railway's significance as a landmark regional integration initiative, projecting long-term economic benefits for all participating nations (ADB, 2023). Analysts such as Navbahor Imamova argue that Uzbekistan's investment in Afghanistan's infrastructure is a strategic move to secure regional stability and economic growth, reinforcing its position as a leading economic power in Central Asia (Eurasianet, 2023c).

Despite the promising economic outlook, several challenges continue to persist. Security risks remain a major concern, as Afghanistan's ongoing instability could jeopardize infrastructure projects like the Trans-Afghan Railway, impacting their long-term economic viability (Rashid, 2023). Additionally, some scholars argue that Uzbekistan's deepening economic ties with Afghanistan could lead to economic dependence, rendering its trade policy vulnerable to shifts in Afghanistan's political and security landscape (ICG, 2023). The impact of international sanctions on the Taliban government also complicates trade relations, as restrictions on financial transactions and foreign investment could hinder economic cooperation (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Uzbekistan has taken proactive steps to mitigate these risks. By collaborating with international financial institutions, including the Asian Development Bank, Uzbekistan aims to ensure the security and sustainability of its infrastructure projects (ADB, 2023). Moreover, its trade strategy remains diversified, with strong partnerships across Central Asia, Russia, and China, reducing the risks of overreliance on Afghanistan (Khalid, 2023). Unlike other regional actors, Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan is pragmatic and focused on economic benefits, rather than political alliances, allowing it to navigate complex geopolitical dynamics without direct involvement in Afghanistan's governance issues (Abdullaev, 2022). Subsequently, Uzbekistan's economic cooperation with Afghanistan underscores its strategic commitment to regional trade and connectivity. By investing in key infrastructure projects, such as the Trans-Afghan Railway and the Termez border crossing, Uzbekistan is positioning itself as a central player in regional trade networks. While concerns about security, economic dependence, and sanctions persist, Uzbekistan's risk mitigation strategies and diversified trade partnerships demonstrate a calculated approach to economic

expansion. As regional integration deepens, Uzbekistan's pragmatic engagement with Afghanistan could serve as a model for balancing economic development with geopolitical stability.

Major Infrastructure and Connectivity Initiatives

Uzbekistan has strategically advanced its economic collaboration with Afghanistan through significant infrastructure and connectivity projects, aiming to enhance regional trade and stability. A pivotal initiative in this endeavor is the Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar Railway Project, which seeks to establish a direct rail link connecting Uzbekistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan. This approximately 600-kilometer railway is projected to commence construction in 2025, with an estimated cost of \$4.8 billion. Upon completion, it is anticipated to reduce cargo delivery times between Uzbekistan and Pakistan by about five days, thereby facilitating more efficient trade routes across Central and South Asia (AKIpress News Agency, 2025; Wikipedia, 2023). In addition to rail connectivity, Uzbekistan has been a crucial energy partner for Afghanistan, supplying substantial electricity to address the country's energy deficits. In December 2024, Afghanistan's state-run power company, Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS), extended its electricity import agreement with Uzbekistan until the end of 2025, ensuring a stable energy supply to meet Afghanistan's growing domestic demand (Amu TV, 2024). This energy cooperation not only aids in meeting Afghanistan's immediate power needs but also strengthens bilateral relations and fosters economic interdependence.

Furthermore, both nations have engaged in negotiating multiple agreements to enhance road and transport connectivity. Notably, the development of the Termez border crossing into a central significant logistics hub has facilitated the movement of goods and humanitarian aid. This initiative integrates Afghanistan deeply into regional economic networks and promotes stability through increased trade (CAREC Program, 2023). These collaborative efforts underscore Uzbekistan's commitment to regional integration and economic development, positioning both countries to benefit from improved infrastructure and strengthened economic ties.

Challenges in Economic Cooperation

Uzbekistan's economic collaboration with Afghanistan is confronted by substantial financial and logistical obstacles, notably in executing large-scale infrastructure endeavors like the Trans-Afghan Railway. This project, estimated at \$5 billion, has encountered funding deficits and security concerns, particularly within Afghanistan's challenging terrains (ADB, 2023; Daryo.uz, 2023). The governance practices of the Taliban further exacerbate these challenges. Their limited administrative proficiency and opaque governance structures have eroded investor confidence, with over 65% of regional enterprises expressing reluctance to engage economically under the current regime (Eurasianet, 2023c). Additionally, international sanctions and the absence of formal recognition of the Taliban have severely impeded Afghanistan's financial operations, including the freezing of approximately \$9 billion in central bank assets, thereby obstructing trade and investment flows (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Despite these adversities, Uzbekistan remains steadfast in its commitment to regional economic integration, actively seeking collaborative solutions with neighboring nations

and international entities to surmount these impediments and foster regional stability and growth.

REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS OF UZBEKISTAN-TALIBAN RELATIONS

Central Asia's Response to Taliban Rule

In the wake of the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, Central Asian nations have adopted varied strategies in response to Uzbekistan's proactive engagement with the new regime. Kazakhstan, for instance, has aligned with Uzbekistan's approach by removing the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations, signaling a shift toward normalization of relations (Avdaliani, 2024). This move reflects a broader regional trend of cautious engagement, as Kazakhstan seeks to balance security concerns with economic interests. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan has maintained trade relations with Afghanistan, aiming to reintegrate the country into the regional economy while carefully navigating the complexities of Taliban governance (Caspian Policy Center, 2023). In contrast, Tajikistan has expressed apprehension toward the Taliban, primarily due to concerns over ethnic minorities and border security. The Tajik government has bolstered its military presence along the Afghan border and conducted joint military exercises with Russia and Uzbekistan, underscoring its cautious stance (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2021). On the other hand, Turkmenistan has adopted a neutral position, focusing on energy exports and infrastructure projects like the TAPI pipeline, while avoiding direct political engagement with the Taliban (Eurasianet, 2023g). These differing strategies highlight the complex geopolitical landscape of Central Asia, where each nation calibrates its policies based on national interests, security concerns, and economic objectives.

Uzbekistan's Role in International Mediation

Uzbekistan has emerged as a key diplomatic player in international mediation, particularly in its efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Given its geographical proximity and historical ties, Uzbekistan has pursued a pragmatic foreign policy prioritizing peace-building, regional dialogue, and economic integration. The country has hosted peace talks, facilitated negotiations among Afghan stakeholders, and maintained open channels of communication with the Taliban and other political actors. Additionally, Uzbekistan has collaborated with international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to mobilize humanitarian aid and regional security initiatives. However, despite its proactive diplomatic engagement, Uzbekistan faces challenges such as limited leverage over the Taliban, resource constraints, and geopolitical complexities. Understanding Uzbekistan's mediation efforts requires an analysis of its initiatives, strategic objectives, and broader regional and international implications.

Uzbekistan's mediation efforts are exemplified by its role in hosting international peace talks and promoting regional diplomatic engagements. One of the most significant initiatives was the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan, held in July 2023, which brought together representatives from over 20 countries and international organizations to discuss Afghanistan's political future, security cooperation, and economic reconstruction (UN News, 2023). This conference reinforced Uzbekistan's commitment to fostering dialogue and advocating for an inclusive Afghan government.

In addition to high-level diplomatic summits, Uzbekistan has engaged directly with the Taliban leadership, urging them to uphold international norms, particularly concerning human rights and governance inclusivity (ICG, 2023). Unlike many countries that have adopted a cautious approach, Uzbekistan has maintained consistent diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, reflecting its pragmatic strategy to ensure regional stability.

Beyond political mediation, Uzbekistan has promoted economic integration as a tool for stability. A notable example is the Trans-Afghan Railway Project, which aims to connect Uzbekistan with Pakistan via Afghanistan. This railway is envisioned as a critical infrastructure project that would not only enhance trade and regional connectivity but also contribute to Afghanistan's economic recovery, reducing incentives for instability and conflict (ADB, 2023). By integrating Afghanistan into regional economic frameworks, Uzbekistan seeks to promote stability through development rather than through purely political interventions.

Uzbekistan has strengthened its mediation efforts through strategic partnerships with international organizations. The United Nations (UN) has been a crucial partner in Uzbekistan's diplomatic initiatives, especially in humanitarian aid and political negotiations. In 2023, Uzbekistan collaborated with the UN to deliver over 2,000 tons of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, addressing the country's worsening economic and humanitarian crisis (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). The UN has consistently acknowledged Uzbekistan's constructive role in regional diplomacy, particularly emphasizing non-military solutions to Afghanistan's challenges (UN News, 2023). As a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Uzbekistan has been actively involved in regional security dialogues regarding Afghanistan. The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, in which Uzbekistan plays a leading role, has facilitated multilateral discussions on counterterrorism, border security, and economic cooperation (Khalid, 2023c). These engagements reflect Uzbekistan's broader foreign policy goal of ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a source of extremism or instability that could threaten Central Asian states. Similarly, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has collaborated with Uzbekistan to address Afghanistan's humanitarian and economic crises. In November 2023, Uzbek and OIC representatives held consultations focused on mobilizing financial assistance and advocating for Afghan women's rights (Ariana News, 2023). This highlights Uzbekistan's growing role as a regional mediator that aligns its efforts with international humanitarian and diplomatic frameworks.

Uzbekistan's diplomatic strategy reflects a pragmatic and balanced approach to Afghanistan. Unlike Western states that have primarily disengaged from Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power, Uzbekistan has maintained diplomatic channels while emphasizing regional cooperation. This approach serves multiple strategic objectives: first, it helps Uzbekistan prevent security threats such as terrorism and drug trafficking from spilling into its borders; second, it strengthens Uzbekistan's economic position by ensuring continued trade and connectivity; and third, it enhances Uzbekistan's diplomatic influence within Central Asia (Eurasianet, 2023c). However, despite these advantages, Uzbekistan's mediation efforts face several limitations.

One major challenge is the Taliban's reluctance to adhere to international norms. While Uzbekistan has called for an inclusive government and the protection of human rights, the Taliban has shown little willingness to accommodate these demands (Rashid, 2023). This raises concerns about the effectiveness of Uzbekistan's diplomatic efforts in shaping Afghanistan's internal governance. Additionally, resource constraints pose another challenge. Unlike larger global powers, Uzbekistan does not have the financial or military resources to enforce its mediation efforts, making its influence largely dependent on diplomatic persuasion rather than economic or military pressure (ICG, 2023). Finally, geopolitical divisions among international actors further complicate Uzbekistan's mediation role. While some states advocate for diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, others remain cautious, leading to a fragmented international approach that undermines cohesive efforts for Afghan stabilization (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Despite skepticism regarding Uzbekistan's influence in Afghan affairs, several factors reinforce the significance of its mediation efforts. First, Uzbekistan's pragmatic diplomacy ensures that Afghanistan remains connected to regional and international networks. Even if its engagement does not lead to immediate political reforms, it prevents Afghanistan from becoming diplomatically isolated, which could exacerbate its economic and security challenges (Abdullaev, 2022). Second, Uzbekistan's mediation is not unilateral but is backed by major international organizations such as the UN, SCO, and OIC. This multilateral support strengthens Uzbekistan's diplomatic position and enhances its credibility as a neutral mediator (Khalid, 2023d). Lastly, regional cooperation boosts collective stability. While Uzbekistan's individual efforts may have limitations, its collaboration with other Central Asian states, as well as international actors, contributes to a broader framework for Afghan stability (ICG, 2023). Hence, Uzbekistan's role in international mediation, particularly in Afghanistan, highlights its commitment to regional stability, economic integration, and diplomatic engagement. Through high-level peace conferences, direct diplomatic negotiations with the Taliban, and strategic collaboration with international organizations, Uzbekistan has positioned itself as a key player in shaping Afghanistan's future. However, the effectiveness of its efforts depends on various factors, including the Taliban's willingness to cooperate, the availability of financial and diplomatic resources, and the broader international consensus on engaging with Afghanistan. While challenges remain, Uzbekistan's mediation approach—anchored in pragmatic diplomacy, regional cooperation, and economic stabilization—represents an important contribution to regional peace efforts. Moving forward, sustained diplomatic engagement, coupled with international support, will be crucial in determining the success of Uzbekistan's mediation initiatives.

Security Concerns and Counterterrorism Cooperation

Uzbekistan faces significant security challenges from transnational militant groups, notably the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The IMU, formed initially to establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan, has evolved over time. In 2015, the IMU pledged allegiance to ISKP, thereby intensifying the threat landscape in Central Asia (GNET, 2023). ISKP has since expanded its operations, employing extensive online propaganda to recruit members and incite unrest across the region (Stimson Center, 2022). Uzbekistan has implemented comprehensive

border security measures and engaged in counterterrorism collaborations in response to these threats. The nation has fortified its borders, particularly along the Afghan frontier, to prevent the infiltration of militants and curb illegal activities. This includes modernizing border infrastructure and enhancing surveillance capabilities (Eurasianet, 2023f). Additionally, Uzbekistan actively participates in regional security frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), headquartered in Tashkent. These platforms facilitate coordinated efforts among member states to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism (SCO RATS, n.d.).

Collaboration with international partners further bolsters Uzbekistan's counterterrorism initiatives. The United States, for instance, has engaged in security cooperation with Uzbekistan, focusing on counterterrorism and border security to enhance regional stability (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Moreover, Uzbekistan's involvement in the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee underscores its commitment to global security efforts (U.S. Department of State, 2019). Despite these proactive measures, challenges persist. The dynamic nature of transnational militant groups necessitates continuous adaptation of strategies and sustained international cooperation. Uzbekistan's multifaceted approach, encompassing robust border security, regional alliances, and global partnerships, reflects its dedication to countering the pervasive threats posed by ISKP, IMU, and similar organizations.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Obstacles in Sustaining Diplomatic and Economic Relations

Uzbekistan's diplomatic and economic relations with Afghanistan face significant obstacles due to Afghanistan's persistent political instability, the Taliban's governance limitations, and policy unpredictability. One of the key challenges is Afghanistan's governance fragmentation, where divisions within the Taliban leadership and the absence of a structured, inclusive administration have led to inconsistent policymaking, hindering long-term cooperation (Khalid, 2023b). The economic downturn following the Taliban's return to power has further strained relations, with Afghanistan's GDP contracting by 20% in 2022, leading to a decline in trade between the two countries by 15% in early 2023 (World Bank, 2023; Eurasianet, 2023c). This economic instability, compounded by over 28 million Afghans requiring humanitarian aid, severely limits Afghanistan's ability to engage in sustainable economic partnerships (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA], 2023). Security concerns further exacerbate these challenges, as transnational militant groups like the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) pose direct threats to Uzbekistan's border security and infrastructure projects (ICG, 2023). The Trans-Afghan Railway project, a critical initiative for regional connectivity, has suffered repeated delays due to security threats and the Taliban's failure to ensure safe operational conditions (ADB, 2023).

The Taliban's lack of administrative capacity and policy coherence creates additional hurdles for long-term engagement. Unlike previous Afghan governments that had technocrats managing various state functions, the Taliban's governance model remains characterized by opaque decision-making, insufficient institutional expertise, and the absence of a legal and financial framework necessary for stable international trade

and investment (Rashid, 2023). Their restrictive policies, particularly concerning women's rights, education bans, and civil liberties, have resulted in widespread international condemnation, economic isolation, and the suspension of crucial development aid (Human Rights Watch, 2023; UN News, 2023). These factors directly impact Uzbekistan's diplomatic calculus, as excessive engagement with the Taliban risks straining relations with global financial institutions and Western allies (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). The Taliban's inconsistent foreign policy stance further complicates engagement, as they simultaneously seek international recognition while resisting calls for governance reforms. This approach has deterred regional actors from committing to long-term economic collaboration (ICG, 2023).

Despite these challenges, some analysts argue that sustained economic engagement with Afghanistan could lead to a more pragmatic approach to Taliban governance (Rashid, 2023). Proponents emphasize that Uzbekistan's ongoing trade and infrastructure investments could promote policy predictability (ICG, 2023). Additionally, China's growing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments in Afghanistan provide an alternative regional model, focusing on resource extraction rather than comprehensive economic development (Eurasianet, 2023e). However, critics contend that such optimism overlooks structural deficiencies in the Taliban's governance, the deteriorating security environment, and the ongoing absence of global financial integration (World Bank, 2023). Furthermore, the assertion that regional engagement alone can stabilize Afghanistan fails to account for the Taliban's resistance to institutional reforms, which remains a significant barrier to international cooperation (Human Rights Watch, 2023). In summary, Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan is constrained by political instability, economic fragility, security concerns, and human rights violations under the Taliban's rule. While some believe economic collaboration could foster more predictable governance, the Taliban's inconsistent policies and structural weaknesses render sustained engagement a high-risk endeavor. Given these challenges, Uzbekistan must adopt a pragmatic, and cautious approach, balancing economic interests with geopolitical realities and regional security (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). As Afghanistan's trajectory remains uncertain, Uzbekistan's policy direction will likely depend on how effectively the Taliban can address governance shortcomings and mitigate security risks in the coming years.

The Future of Uzbekistan's Engagement with the Taliban

Economic imperatives, regional security concerns, and broader geopolitical considerations shape Uzbekistan's engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, Uzbekistan has adopted a pragmatic approach, focusing on economic cooperation, trade, and regional connectivity projects while carefully navigating the absence of formal international recognition of the Taliban regime (ICG, 2023). This engagement will evolve based on several factors, including economic opportunities, regional alignments, and shifting international dynamics.

Uzbekistan has positioned itself as a key regional economic partner for Afghanistan, emphasizing trade and infrastructure development. Bilateral trade between the two countries reached approximately \$866 million in 2023, highlighting the growing economic interdependence (Interfax, 2024). The most significant project in this

partnership is the Trans-Afghan Railway, for which Uzbekistan has allocated \$500 million. This railway aims to connect Uzbekistan with South Asian markets via Afghanistan, enhancing regional connectivity and trade efficiency (Tashkent Times, 2024). Additionally, Uzbekistan continues to supply electricity to Afghanistan, mitigating its energy crisis and reinforcing economic ties (Uzbek Ministry of Energy, 2023). However, continued economic engagement is not without challenges. The lack of formal international recognition of the Taliban government complicates Uzbekistan's ability to attract international funding for joint projects (IntelliNews, 2024). Furthermore, concerns regarding security, governance, and human rights violations under the Taliban could create reputational risks for Uzbekistan's economic ventures (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The evolving geopolitical landscape in Central Asia will influence Uzbekistan's future engagement with Afghanistan. Uzbekistan's economic interests align with broader regional connectivity initiatives, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This may lead to increased trilateral cooperation involving China, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan (The Diplomat, 2024). Additionally, Russia's growing involvement in Afghanistan, including diplomatic engagements with the Taliban, could prompt Uzbekistan to recalibrate its policies to align with Russian interests while maintaining its independent foreign policy stance (Eurasianet, 2023d). Moreover, neighboring countries like Iran and Pakistan are also deepening their ties with the Taliban, affecting Uzbekistan's regional calculations. The presence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan and its implications for Pakistan's security further complicate regional dynamics, potentially impacting Uzbekistan's security cooperation with Afghanistan (ICG, 2023). A scenario where Uzbekistan coordinates with regional actors on counterterrorism efforts while maintaining economic engagement with the Taliban remains a plausible policy direction.

Uzbekistan's long-term engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan will depend on balancing economic pragmatism with diplomatic caution. The country's foreign policy strategy revolves around regional stability and economic growth while adhering to international diplomatic norms (Khalid, 2023d). A critical factor shaping Uzbekistan's policy is the international community's stance on Taliban recognition. While Uzbekistan continues to engage with Afghanistan on practical economic matters, it has not officially recognized the Taliban government. If major global powers, such as China or Russia, formally recognize the Taliban, Uzbekistan may find itself adjusting its diplomatic approach accordingly (UN News, 2023). Conversely, if international pressure on the Taliban regarding human rights and governance intensifies, Uzbekistan may adopt a more cautious approach, limiting its engagement to non-political economic initiatives (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Uzbekistan views Afghanistan as a gateway to South Asian markets, making economic engagement a strategic priority. Despite security concerns, the benefits of trade and infrastructure projects incentivize continued collaboration. However, Uzbekistan must navigate financial risks associated with limited international investment due to the Taliban's unrecognized status (World Bank, 2023). Security considerations also influence Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan. The presence of extremist groups in Afghanistan, such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), poses a

potential threat to regional stability (ICG, 2023). While Uzbekistan seeks cooperation with the Taliban on counterterrorism, the Taliban's ability to effectively control such groups remains uncertain. Security partnerships with Russia and China may influence Uzbekistan's approach, shaping future cooperation with Afghanistan (Rashid, 2023).

The absence of formal recognition for the Taliban government by the international community limits Afghanistan's ability to engage in global trade and finance. This uncertainty affects Uzbekistan's long-term economic planning, as deeper engagement with an unrecognized regime could strain its diplomatic relations with Western powers (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The recognition debate remains a key determinant of Uzbekistan's engagement strategy. If international recognition continues to be elusive, Uzbekistan may limit its engagement to essential economic and humanitarian activities while refraining from deeper diplomatic ties (ICG, 2023). For that reason, Uzbekistan's future engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan will likely follow a pragmatic approach, balancing economic cooperation with security and diplomatic considerations. Continued economic engagement, particularly through trade and infrastructure projects, is expected to remain a priority. However, the lack of international recognition for the Taliban, security risks, and regional geopolitical shifts present challenges that Uzbekistan must carefully navigate. Future policy shifts will depend on evolving regional dynamics, the stance of major global powers on Taliban recognition, and Uzbekistan's broader economic and security interests.

CONCLUSION

A combination of diplomatic engagement, economic interests, and regional security concerns has shaped Uzbekistan's approach toward the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's takeover in 2021, Tashkent has pursued a pragmatic policy focused on non-interference, trade expansion, and regional mediation. It has positioned itself as a key intermediary, facilitating dialogue between the Taliban and the international community, as seen in the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan (July 2023), which gathered over 20 international stakeholders to discuss economic development, counterterrorism cooperation, and humanitarian aid. Economically, Uzbekistan has strengthened its trade and infrastructure projects with Afghanistan, with bilateral trade reaching \$2.5 billion in 2022 and major projects like the Trans-Afghan Railway enhancing regional connectivity. However, security concerns remain substantial, particularly with the resurgence of terrorist threats from groups such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), with 15 reported terrorist incidents linked to these groups in 2022. Despite economic cooperation, Uzbekistan has expressed concerns over the Taliban's governance, particularly in areas of counterterrorism, border security, and human rights, especially regarding the 28 million Afghans in need of humanitarian assistance, including women facing severe restrictions under Taliban rule.

Given these realities, Uzbekistan should adopt a conditional engagement strategy, ensuring that diplomatic and economic cooperation is contingent on the Taliban's commitments to regional security and financial stability. In particular, security guarantees from the Taliban regarding terrorist networks should be a prerequisite for continued trade and investment. To avoid excessive reliance on Afghanistan's

unstable economy, Uzbekistan must diversify its economic partnerships, strengthening trade links with South and Central Asian states and integrating into broader regional infrastructure initiatives, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, border security measures should be enhanced through intelligence-sharing mechanisms and strengthened cooperation with regional organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to counter terrorism and cross-border smuggling. In the realm of multilateral diplomacy, Uzbekistan should leverage its membership in organizations such as the United Nations (UN), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and SCO to foster a collective approach toward Afghanistan's stability. A Central Asian-led initiative involving Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan could help formulate a regional security framework to address cross-border threats and counterterrorism challenges. Furthermore, Uzbekistan must advocate for Taliban compliance with international norms, using diplomatic and economic leverage to encourage improvements in governance, counterterrorism policies, and human rights protections. Development aid and trade incentives should be offered on the condition that the Taliban demonstrates progress in these areas.

The broader geopolitical implications of Afghanistan's evolving political order indicate that regional stability is a shared responsibility. The security situation in Afghanistan directly affects border security, counterterrorism policies, and regional economic cooperation in Central Asia. A coordinated regional security framework would ensure a more effective response to emerging threats. Additionally, economic connectivity remains a strategic imperative, as projects such as the Trans-Afghan Railway and energy corridors could provide significant economic benefits, provided that political stability is maintained. Given the involvement of global powers such as the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union, Uzbekistan's ability to navigate geopolitical rivalries while securing its national and regional interests will be crucial. Ultimately, Uzbekistan's success in managing its Afghanistan policy will depend on its ability to balance engagement with caution, ensuring that economic cooperation does not come at the cost of security risks. As the geopolitical landscape evolves, a unified Central Asian approach focusing on regional stability, economic integration, and multilateral cooperation will be essential in mitigating challenges and harnessing opportunities in Afghanistan's uncertain future.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

AWP: conceptualization of the research idea, theoretical framework, design and implementation of the methodology, formal analysis of data (including official

statements, economic data, policy reports, and expert assessments), investigation through data collection and interpretation, preparation and writing of the original draft, and critical review and editing of the manuscript, project administration, coordination of the research activity.

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